

A Forestry Top 10

One-third of the United States is covered with forests. How have they been doing over the past century? The country has more trees now than it did in 1920 on approximately the same amount of forestland. It also has the largest legally protected wilderness system in the world, while at the same time sustaining a highly productive and efficient wood products industry.

The Society of American Foresters, the national scientific and educational organization of the forestry profession, has compiled a “Top Ten” list of forestry-related advances in the United States over the past century.

These “Top Ten” are:

1. Reforestation—Until the 1920s, forests were generally logged and abandoned. In comparison, each year an average of 1.7 billion seedlings is planted nationwide—six seedlings planted for every tree harvested. In addition, billions more seedlings are regenerated naturally.

2. Fire protection—At the turn of the century, wildfires annually burned across 20 to 50 million acres of the country, with devastating loss of life and property. Through education, prevention, and control, that amount has been reduced to about 2 to 5 million acres a year—a reduction of 90 percent—while fire’s contributions to forest health have also been studied and better understood.

3. Affordable products and reduction in waste—Today, advanced technology allows us to use every part of the tree for products useful to society. In addition to lumber and paper coming from the trunk of the tree, bark, resins, cellulose, scraps, and even sawdust are turned into products that range from camera cases to medicines to rugs.

4. The return of wildlife—Species such as whitetail deer, wild turkeys, and wood ducks were almost extinct at the turn of the century. Wildlife conservation and habitat enhancement has resulted in flourishing populations of these and other species we now take almost for granted. Now foresters are working with other professionals to improve habitats and ensure survival of other wildlife species.

5. Wilderness protection—America’s first wilderness areas were established by the U.S. Forest Service in the 1920s. Forty years later, the Wilderness Act of 1964 gave legal protection to 9 million acres of wilderness. There are

now 95 million acres in the wilderness system, and 149 million more acres of land in parks, wildlife refuges, and other special, set-aside places. No other country in the world comes close to this amount of legally designated set-aside land.

6. Urban forestry—Municipal ordinances, civic participation and the growth of urban forestry have resulted in the planting and maintenance of millions of trees in our country’s cities and towns, enhancing quality of life and saving energy costs and usage.

7. Research—Decisions made about U.S. forests a century ago were based on what worked in Europe. Since then, forest scientists in the United States have conducted research to control insects and diseases, improve growth rates, enhance soil and water conditions, and to understand other variables that have made our forests among the most productive, sustainable, and healthy in the world.

8. Satellite imagery and other technology—Through such technology as satellite imagery, foresters can monitor the health of the forest and target management activities, map fire outbreak, and identify wildlife and fish habitat for protection.

9. Recreation—An increasing population, the prevalence of the automobile and more leisure time have combined to increase demands for places to go for all types of recreation in a forest—hiking, birding, off-road vehicle riding, and much more. Visitor days (1 person for 12 hours) to federal sites alone totaled 600 million in 1989.

10. Professional education—A century ago, there were no professional forestry schools in the United States. Now, the Society of American Foresters accredits 48 universities to offer specialized forestry education to their students. In addition, 24 institutions are recognized by SAF to offer two-year associates’ degrees. Biology, math, computer science, communications, ethics, and other courses prepare students to deal with the art and science of caring for the forest.

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